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Woman with the Movie Camera Redux:

Revisiting the Position of Women in the Production Classroom

A man has an argument with his girlfriend. The man leaves. The woman gets ready for bed. Later that night, the man returns, breaks into the apartment, stabs the woman to death and stuffs her body into a plastic garbage bag. The man carries the bag downstairs to the alley where he dumps it into a large metal trash receptacle. The man walks off into the night. (Citron and Seiter)

This student film proposal marks the opening of “The Woman with the Movie Camera,” Michelle Citron and Ellen Seiter’s seminal 1981 *Jump Cut* article on the marginalized status of women in the film production classroom. Thirty years later, however, this student proposal could still easily show up in any media production course, and often does. Despite Citron and Seiter’s emphatic call for a “responsive pedagogy” to address violent representations of women in student films and the underrepresentation of women students in the classroom, little has changed at this thirtieth anniversary of the publication of their article.

This essay grew out of panels and discussions at the University Film and Video Association’s 2010 conference on ways to manage violent representations of women in student films. Across the board, instructors in current mixed-gender film programs reported problematic portrayals of women in student work, and noted the low enrollment of women in their classes.

Power relationships and authoritative divides along gender lines among students remain powerfully in effect, with women more likely to take non-technical crew positions (producer, art director) while men assume the role of director and cinematographer. When women do take film courses, they are often reluctant to fully participate in technical demonstrations and critiques. Concerns raised at the conference also included the subject position of the instructor: how might male and female instructors address problematic representations of women differently? What expectations do female students place on their professors to speak out on their behalf?

Like most artistic practices, these issues present a pedagogical dilemma. How do we create a more inclusive classroom while also fostering creativity and freedom of expression among our students? How do we shift representations in student films to more positive and progressive modes without shutting down student ideas?

In response to similar struggles, Citron and Seiter called for not only “broad social changes in both attitudes and opportunities” but, just as importantly, a “responsive pedagogy” to effect change in the classroom. This call, however, has largely gone unheeded. As women film production faculty observing the same challenges thirty years later, we are sounding the call to our fellow teachers once again. Our female students deserve a classroom in which they can grow unhindered and without intimidation. To that end, we have developed practical applications and strategies that lead toward a more responsive pedagogy.

The Problems

Female film students face two primary and intertwined blockades: exclusion from most ranks of professional film production and damaging, often violent representations of women onscreen. Without a sizable and empowered cohort of women in the film industry, these

representations go largely unchallenged, with few alternatives. Together these forces act not only to dissuade female students from pursuing media production, but to suggest that they're not invited in the first place.

Industrial and Sociological Barriers

Although some inroads have been made for women working in film since 1981, most obstacles facing women on the path from classroom to film set remain stubbornly intact in 2011. While 1991—ten years after “The Woman with the Movie Camera”—saw an uptick in the presence of women in film with such milestones as the release of Kathryn Bigelow’s hit *Point Break* and Callie Khouri’s Oscar win for *Thelma and Louise*, the percentage of women in key roles on the top 250 grossing U.S. films shrank from 19% to 16% between 2001 and 2010 (Lauzen, “The Celluloid Ceiling”). As of 1996, the screenwriting profession was 80% male, even though women comprised almost half of those identified as “authors” by the U.S. Census (Bielby and Bielby 265). And in 2009, women comprised only 7% of directors in the top 250 grossing films in the U.S., 23% of producers, 8% of writers, and 2% of cinematographers (Lauzen, “The Celluloid Ceiling”). Even among 906 independent festival films in 2009, women made up only 22% of directors and executive producers, 19% of writers, and 9% of cinematographers (Lauzen, “Independent Women”).

The patriarchal power relationships that define the Hollywood system remain deeply entrenched. Students enter the classroom acutely aware of the legendary status and mystique of the “Director”—the (male) authority of the film set, the Michael Bays, Christopher Nolans, Wes Andersons, and Quentin Tarantinos, to name a few student favorites. As Emerson College film professor Rob Sabal observes, because students have so much exposure to movies and to the mythology of the filmmaking process, “film education in the United States does not begin in film

school... Having internalized the success story of their filmmaking idols, by the time students walk into a film production classroom, they do so with a clear understanding of what it takes to ‘make it’,” which ultimately means ascending the ranks of an “old boys” network (6).

For many students, the role of director holds an air of the exceptional. He is the creative prodigy, romantic visionary, and dictatorial leader, and students feel they must adopt these qualities in the classroom. Indeed, to borrow from Citron and Seiter, “... a cultural stereotype about artists exists very strongly in the mind of the students” that “if adopted by the student in their concept of their own role, serves to close students’ minds in a learning situation and restricts any sense of community developing in the classroom.” Misconceptions about the genius male *auteur* hinder the creative and collaborative development of all students, but this myth especially suggests to women that their very gender renders their chances of success in this field impossibly slim, and certainly restricts their participation in leadership roles.

The fact that women generally enter introductory film classes in late adolescence is also significant to understanding their gender position in these classes. As girls enter adolescence, their overall sense of self-esteem tends to decline as that of their male peers improves (AAUW 7). This drop in self-efficacy particularly affects girls’ confidence in performing concrete tasks and carrying out projects, especially under the watchful eyes of their peers. According to the AAUW report “Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America,”

adolescent girls are more likely than boys to have their declining sense of themselves inhibit their actions and abilities. This difference between girls and boys grows more pronounced with age. The biggest difference in self-esteem

between girls and boys centers on the subject of ‘doing things.’ Boys are much more likely than are girls to feel ‘pretty good at a lot of things.’ (8)

Thus, in film and video classes, which are significantly task- and project-oriented, girls require greater support mechanisms just to gain confidence in making movies, let alone to attain an equitable level of opportunity.

Self-esteem also closely corresponds to young people’s attitudes about the possibility of success in their adult lives, especially as it affects their dreams, careers, and educational paths to those goals. The AAUW report continues,

The higher self-esteem of adolescent boys translates into bigger career dreams. Boys start out at a higher level than do girls when it comes to their career aspirations. The number of boys who aspire to glamorous occupations (rock star, sports star) is greater than that of girls at every stage of adolescence, creating a kind of “glamour gap.” Further, boys are slightly more likely than are girls to believe their own career dreams will come true. Finding it difficult to dream and feeling constrained by gender rules, girls start out with lower hopes for their careers, and are already less confident in their talents and abilities. Girls are much more likely than boys to say they are ‘not smart enough’ or ‘not good enough’ for their dream careers. (9)

Again, this lowered sense of self-value, together with the prospect of entering the heavily male-dominated media industries, throws up a seemingly insurmountable wall for young women.

To further deter women from considering careers in film, even a brief survey of mainstream movies over the past twenty years yields mostly problematic representations of women onscreen. While some powerful female roles have emerged, the contemporary heroine continues to embody highly sexualized ideas of womanhood: young, white, thin, “hot,” and ultimately dependent on men for her identity. A study on representations of men and women in the top 400 grossing films in North America from 1990 to 2006 conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media found that 73% of all characters on screen were male, and women were more than five times as likely to be depicted in sexually revealing clothes (Smith and Cook).

More alarmingly, the depiction of women as targets of violence—rape, assault, murder, etc.—continues to pervade their representation in cinema, TV, and video games. The woman as brutalized victim, of course, not only allows for violence to serve as a pleasurable spectacle, but also promotes the notion of the female as object, robbed of her agency. The underrepresentation of women onscreen, together with undesirable characters as role models, further alienates women from the field.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to integrating women into the academic film curriculum, however, is the power of “stereotype threat.” Women continue to be socialized to believe that their aptitude for technology is inferior to men’s. A young girl’s exposure to electronic technology—computers, video cameras, and other media production equipment—is frequently lower than that of her male peers. Stereotype threat is

a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists (e.g.,

skateboarders, older adults, White men, gang members). Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening (Steele).

In other words, for women, the awareness that they are stereotyped as being poor at technology can instill a fear of using technology, especially under the watchful gaze of their classmates. Stereotype threat persists even among women who feel comfortable with technology. The mere awareness of the stereotype can inhibit her willingness to participate and actually decrease her performance, to cause her to “choke.” (Beilock)

Stereotype threat is particularly powerful when the student is highly invested in the discipline, because she defines herself in part by her participation in it (Steele). Our students, often, identify themselves not just as university students or communications students—they are *film majors*. The fear of becoming a stereotype, then, has a direct negative impact on the student’s self-identity. In film classes, women may be reluctant to take an active role in in-class equipment demonstrations or practice sessions, or a more gregarious role in technical crew positions, because of their fear of living up to the stereotype. To flounder when using equipment, even in ways common to all novices, would reinforce the stereotype and mark her throughout her academic career.

Not surprisingly, then, it’s not uncommon for a 20-person film class to enroll only one or two women. As film faculty, we’ve all taught courses with no women at all. As might be expected, studies on the effects of stereotype threat indicate that “our interest in an area of study increases when prospects seem favorable, when we see other people like ourselves succeeding.

When there is less evidence that we can succeed (such as the hurdles women face in high-level math and science), interest and willingness to participate decrease” (Beilock 115).

The barriers to success in the film industry are replicated and modeled too tenaciously in our film classes, shutting women out before they’ve had a chance to try. As instructors, we can change this situation, but it will require significant adjustments and transformations in our cinematic pedagogy.

Problematic Representations

Over the years, the steady beat of violence in student films raised concerns for us, a concern echoed by the overwhelming response to the the 2010 UFVA panel. Without an accompanying active professional conversation as to how to address works of replication, faculty operate in isolation to address scripted and seemingly prescribed acts of violence. The need for a unified front to combat these issues prompted greater investigation into the causes.

The imagery and narratives that pervade student films spring from their lifelong engagement with popular culture and media entertainment. Our students rarely arrive in the college production classroom with a critical foundation in place. And they rarely have been challenged to think critically about techniques and meanings implied by the work that inspires them to major in film. Film instructors, therefore, must work at understanding the knowledge base of our students. Most often, a student’s primary goal is to entertain. Consciously or not, this “entertainment” manifests as replications of popular media, yielding trends remarkably similar to the student film proposal outlined above.

For example, Eminem’s 2010 hit song featuring singer Rihanna, “Love the Way You Lie,” and its accompanying music video, tell a tale of a violently abusive and highly sexualized relationship between a man and a woman. Coincidentally the song pairs two musicians with

known histories of domestic violence: Eminem (with ex-wife Kim) and Rihanna (with ex-boyfriend Chris Brown). Eminem concludes his portion of the song with, “If she ever tries to fucking leave again / I’mma tie her to the bed / And set the house on fire”, while Rihanna’s chorus follows hauntingly, “Just gonna stand there / And watch me burn / But that’s alright / Because I like / The way it hurts” (Eminem). The song hit number one on several Billboard charts (Hot 100, Pop Songs, Radio Songs, Rap Songs, and Ringtones to name a few), and received even more critical acclaim with the debut of the music video starring Megan Fox and Dominic Monaghan (Billboard). Though critics cite the video as controversial, ultimately the message is celebrated as a brave warning against domestic violence (Thomas).

This interesting spin on misogyny, from the unlikely and suddenly heroic messenger Eminem, comes as a surprise after his vicious song *Kim*, in which he narrates the murder of his real life ex-wife by the same name. In *Generation M*, a documentary about misogyny and sexism in American media and culture, Dr. Thomas Keith posits that Eminem’s success is possible largely because his object of aggression is women. Sadly, a market for misogyny exists, and a deafening silence surrounds it. Contemporary popular culture rewards such behavior, humor, and entertainment with commercial success. That deadly pair, silence and success, makes it extremely difficult for our students to position themselves in opposition to misogyny. It requires risk and vocalization. It requires students to challenge images of misogyny, and thus challenge the image of “success.”

Confronting problematic representations will often be met with some form of resistance. Sociologist Neal King has attempted to “discover patterns in filmmaker response to charges of misogyny, in order to draw conclusions about the state of motion-picture marketing and the gender politics of the filmmaker community” (King, 3). In his research he outlines three primary

methods of *denial of injury*. “The first form dismisses such judgments as inappropriate to the realm of entertainment, the second judges the movies not as misogynist, and the third mocks critics as unable to make valid judgments” (King, 3). These forms of defense are not unique to industry professionals, but extend to the production classroom as well.

When challenging a student to discuss racist, sexist or homophobic films, whether student- or professionally-made, it is not unusual to be met with King’s first method of denial of injury (“It’s *just* entertainment.”). Such a response automatically places the student in a position of determined disengagement from critical analysis, and if directed to a female faculty member, further positions the instructor as having special interests, being out of touch, or lacking a sense of humor. Conversely, filmmakers often enlist women to assist with such denials of injury.

As “privileged judges of misogyny,” women are often employed by filmmakers to defend the work in question (King, 5). King cites numerous interviews with women in such a position, for example Isabella Rossellini (*Blue Velvet*) and editor Thelma Schoonmaker (*Cape Fear*).

King writes, “The most common form of tacit admission that the film is truly deviant, however, comes in the form of compensation. Filmmakers congratulate the actresses for their courage and note the positive effects that the notorious movies had on their career.” (12).

After all, it took the role of Leticia Musgrove in *Monster’s Ball* for the Academy to bestow the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role to Halle Berry, the first black woman to receive that honor (2001). And not until eight years later and the role of Claireece Precious Jones in the film, *Precious*, did the Academy nominate another black actress, Gabourey Sidibe, in that same category (2009). These examples suggest that women have an opening and a future in the industry, but only if they participate in misogynistic roles—tactics that damage

women's progress and further polarize our collective position whether in the industry or in the film classroom.

In considering these examples on the thirtieth anniversary of Citron and Seiter's article, the contemporary pop cultural landscape does not look dramatically different from their 1981 social environment, albeit with updated technology that communicates sexism at even higher speeds to wider audiences. Sure, some argue that women have made progress. In fact, after a mere 82 years, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences finally awarded Best Director to a woman, Kathryn Bigelow for *The Hurt Locker*, incidentally a military war drama with an almost entirely male cast. The award was a win for women in film, but the triumph was notable because of its glaring exceptionality. Demonstrating a successful future to our female students proves difficult amidst such a pervasive absence of women and women's success in the field. During Tina Fey's acceptance speech for the 2010 Mark Twain Prize, she quips:

I never thought I would even qualify for the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor... Apparently I'm only the third woman ever to receive this award... I do hope that women are achieving at a rate these days that we can stop counting what number they are at things. Yes, I was the first female head writer at Saturday Night Live, and yes, I was only the second woman ever to be pregnant while on the show, and now tonight I am the third female recipient of this prize. I'd love to be the fourth woman to do something but I just don't see myself married to Lorne [Michaels]." (Mark Twain Prize)

In a culture that provides television, game, new media, political commentary, comedy and music entertainment within the context of misogyny, it's no wonder students regenerate such themes in their films. And it's no wonder that students are influenced and inspired when they see the critical acclaim and success of the directors, actors and creative teams involved in producing such content. Unfortunately, this inspiration and influence often translate to empty replications: films riddled with stereotypes and familiar plot points, but void of any meaning or real emotion.

Three primary characteristics shape the acts of mimicry in student films: two narrative-based, and the third, visual. The narrative logic for brutalizing the female body falls into two distinct categories. Either the female cheats on the boyfriend or husband and ends up graphically beaten, assaulted physically and/or sexually, and often killed. Or, the young woman does not know the man or know he has feelings for her, and his violence is an act of unrequited love. This unrequited love needs only a slight motivation, if any, to prompt the attack. Obsession operates as the justification for, or understanding of, the violence. The third characteristic shaping student work manifests in the visual aesthetic of the film. These depictions graphically, gratuitously and visually break the female body down in relationship to the male gaze. The visual fragmentation underscores the dehumanizing nature of the broken and brutalized body, as the camera constructs a gaze that derives pleasure and power from the fragmentation.

These violent images in student work, as representative of dominant cinematic trends, translate into ideological power struggles in class. In most classroom environments, the majority sets the tone: *this* is what's cool; *these* are the kinds of films that will be accepted here; if you want to entertain your peers, *these* are your choices. In his article "But It's Only a Movie," James

Linton writes:

More generally, popular US films operate as “dramas of reassurance.” The beliefs, attitudes and values presented in Hollywood films tend to resonate with the dominant beliefs, attitudes and values of American society. In other words, the dominant ideology of a society tends to be reinforced by the ideology presented in its films. (Linton, 8)

The attitudes held by students affect their ability to accept ideologies and images outside dominant dramas of reassurance. These attitudes populate the production classroom. The challenge to succeed and be accepted in such a learning environment is substantial for those in the minority: women, racial minorities, those identifying as LGBT, or even those who do not have the economic privilege to keep up with mainstream culture. For these students and even for those we may perceive as among the majority, peer pressure is a force that ripples through the creative process of many students, and restricts unconventional, critical, or subversive content in their work.

As production faculty, we cannot ignore the pervasiveness of such problematic depictions in student work. The regurgitation of narrative and visual tropes will not fade, and should not surprise us. Students understand the act of replication at play within their work. As one student stated in a course discussion regarding three works with violent assaults in her class, “but this is what we see. Of course it is what we make.” We cannot expect that content which permeates our media landscape will fail to dominate our classrooms. As such, a strategy of in-class response cannot be our primary strategy of intervention. We must consider pedagogical interventions that

permeate course design. These interventions should establish a critical forum for engaging character development, narrative structure and production values as means for producing meaning as well as for producing entertainment.

Without such strategies, we enter into a vicious cycle in which stereotypical and damaging representations from mainstream media are regurgitated in student projects, which further alienates marginalized students, enables uncritical conformity to succeed, and refuels the Hollywood machine.

Solutions

As Rob Sabal and other film professors have noted, “the industrial model of film production is uncritically reproduced at many film schools... Assigning students to a particular role—producer, director, cinematographer, editor—without interrogating the inherent and implied power relationships in this kind of organization invites future conflicts” (7). Many film schools currently operate under the misconception that to fully prepare our students for industry we must replicate industrial practices in the classroom. Not only does the simple replication of hierarchical power relationships in industry ultimately create personal struggles within groups, it reproduces the gender disparities at play in professional film production.

The following strategies for improving gender equity in the classroom draw largely upon the goals of critical pedagogy, that is, a pedagogy that embraces student reflection on the learning process and challenges ways in which inequality and oppressive relationships are generated and replicated in the classroom. Feminist pedagogy is closely linked to critical pedagogy, and to that end, promotes a learning environment that makes student discussion of authority and gender roles a part of the curriculum.

With inclusion as a primary goal, we foster activities that engage active learning and build in opportunities for students to communicate and reflect upon their own learning and learning styles—a process which encourages students to not only take responsibility for their own education, but to be accountable for it. In directly addressing, and deconstructing, power relationships within the classroom, we seek to empower those who might otherwise feel excluded or diminished.

Fusing Form and Content

The nature of production classes, particularly at the introductory level, requires a significant amount of time dedicated to technology and technique. Add to that the anxiety of cost-recovery ratios and administrators who want enrollments to increase per section, and suddenly time dedicated to each individual project becomes impossible to manage.

Our respective departments maintain a high level of creative freedom for our students, despite the fact that each semester a number of student works are purely derivative, racist, homophobic and/or misogynistic. Creative freedom allows students space and time to find their voices as filmmakers. Whether students like it or not, the best way to do this is through the symbiotic relationship of film theory and technique. Citron and Seiter sounded a similar sentiment: “the teacher must reject any approach to film teaching which separates form from content.” Pedagogical practice that stresses the need for theoretical foundations and critical analysis in the production classroom develops students’ abilities to produce work at a technically competent level, while maintaining a firm command over the meaning they strive to communicate to their viewers. Structured courses with strategic assignments can provide opportunities to quell mimicry, while also building a framework for discussion when students present films that perpetuate stereotypical representations and regurgitated scenes of violence.

First, instructors should never teach a technique or piece of equipment without also engaging the class in an analysis of the meaning communicated or implied by the technique in question. For example, when introducing lights, exposure and lighting ratios, the instructor can draw upon aesthetics of privilege and access (ex: Hollywood, guerrilla documentary, experimental modes, first person D.I.Y. practices), variations in genre (ex: film noir, romantic comedy, etc.), and even discuss differences between lighting men and women in classical Hollywood cinematic practice. This approach reminds students that technology is a tool, and mitigates the inclination to view cinematic apparatuses as fetishistic (and neutral) objects in and of themselves. These lectures and demonstrations should be followed by structured assignments that ask students to put the concepts into practice in the field.

An additional strategy to consider for production students is a theory/practice journal, informal writing about their field experiences that prompt students to specify the relationship between theory and practice. This initiates an opportunity for students to reflect on the forms of cinematic expression present in their work and the meaning communicated or attempted.

Furthermore, if mimicry, sexism and misogyny crop up, students must directly address their intentions in writing, which provides a point of entry for the instructor's suggestions and guidance.

Second, the instructor must promote and practice *filmmaking as experience*. John Dewey applied this concept to art in his seminal book, *Art as Experience*, suggesting that the aesthetic quality of emotion is what gives unity and completeness to an experience (43). By extension, cultivating personal experiences based on our known emotions is key to achieving unity and authenticity in our creative work. Conversely, producing recycled narratives and representations breeds superficial emotion and hollow characters. To deter our students from this trap, introduce

creative writing assignments that call upon memories, portraiture and personal experiences. These exercises are particularly helpful in freshman or introductory level courses. Production assignments can then be derived from the students' writing.

The object is for students to draw upon their known emotions and experiences, not that of others. While not all students like such exercises, these assignments validate and reinforce that students do in fact have real life experience to draw upon. This validation is extremely important for young, developing artists in discovering and developing their personal voice and style separate from outside media influences. The students will, of course, learn the tools of the trade, but ultimately they find that what's most important when making original cinematic work is their personal perspective. Rather than simply mimicking what's come before, students can go even further with these exercises, finding opportunities to grapple with their own thoughts on issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, and how their ideas on these topics have been shaped by media influences. Creation from experience becomes a process for exploring the origins of students' ideas about certain groups and their representation on film.

Third, the moment a student steps into the production classroom, the instructor must actively establish an open environment dedicated to critical discussion and critique of student work. This means making time to view and critique student projects, rough cuts and exercises. This means having a discussion with students about respect, and framing conversations to cross differences. It means prioritizing film form in critiques to demonstrate the power cinematic technique has in constructing representations, rather than attacking the representations themselves. Scholar and Professor Patricia R. Zimmerman writes, "If a film crosses into a racist representation, students can draw on the formal parts of the critique to explain how and why

rather than to simply assert. Ironically this inversion of form over content actually can spark much more complex discussion about the politics of representation” (270).

Placing emphasis on film form fosters an objective, concrete discussion of the work at hand. This strategy quells content-driven opinions, which can quickly deteriorate into personal attacks. Furthermore, having students present entries from their theory/practice journals functions to begin or supplement class critiques focused on form. This strategy is particularly effective in a collectively shy or reserved class that struggles with conversations about controversial representations.

Lastly, a careful consideration of representation in the choice of works to screen as examples in class is imperative, and feeds into students’ nascent ideas of what constitutes viable imagery and storytelling strategies. In discussing cinematography, for example, the instructor should consider not just the technique demonstrated in a particular film, but the content. Point-of-view shots in *Psycho*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, or *Saving Private Ryan* might serve as powerful exemplars of form, but they run the risk of instilling in students the notion that strong technique goes hand-in-hand with violent content. Instead, integrating a comprehensive spectrum of genres, techniques, and modes in showcasing the possibilities of cinematic expression can not only generate discussion about the construction of audiovisual meaning, but can inspire students to incorporate into their own work elements of vision and voice they hadn’t previously encountered.

On that point, Zimmerman continues, “To pre-empt the fascination with Hollywood, we screen a wide range of experimental, documentary, and narrative film to provide different role models and artistic strategies” (272) and that in doing so, “[w]hen white male students addicted to classical narratives featuring macho fight scenes became class rebels, we knew that our

pluralizing of film screenings and extension of the range of debates in critiques had been effective” (275). This tactic provides another means for undoing Hollywood as the (only) model for cinematic production, with all its attendant representational issues, and transforms the classroom itself into a more pluralized venue of expression.

Strategies of Response

A deranged person kidnaps a young girl, kills her, and chops her into pieces. The killer stuffs the parts into the carcasses of dead animals and throws them in a river.

-Student film synopsis, 2007

In asking students to consider the relationship of form and content, we need to develop pedagogical interventions that permeate course design, interventions that invite an expanded range of cinematic representations. While we can provide positive models and an inclusive space for discussion, we must also develop strategies for successfully addressing violent depictions when they do emerge in student work. In determining how to construct an “in the moment” response, the following criteria should be considered: 1. The well-being of the student producing the work. 2. The well-being of other students within the classroom. 3. The subject position of the faculty member. 4. The impact of a response on short and long-term learning outcomes.

Our courses often mark a student’s initial foray into creative work. First time production students assume considerable risk in projecting new works onto the screen. In an effort to challenge the content of the work, we do not want to shut the student down in relationship to the course or the creative process. We must remember that replication is at play and unpacking these

representations taps into the very systems into which our students have been interpolated.

Challenging our students challenges the very works, artists, and systems they revere.

Dr. Homa Hoodfar disputes the “implicit assumption in much current critical pedagogy literature that students are necessarily willing agents who welcome unconventional classroom interactions and a critical approach to the social structure” (Hoodfar, 309). Students look to us to stand in as the expert, and are most comfortable learning within the expert model. The expert model invites less risk on the part of the faculty member and on the part of the student. To foster student-centered learning while, simultaneously, challenging the very models students seek to perpetuate, represents a radical change in learning styles for many of our students. Hoodfar goes on to say that “to learn to question material, particularly that written by famous and well-established academics, is unsettling for many undergraduate students, whose schooling has been oriented to texts and teachers as the repositories of knowledge” (Hoodfar, 309). The same is true for students studying those they consider to be the masters of film.

When we challenge the acts of violence our students choose to depict, we engage our students on fraught terrain—a terrain comprised of inaugural creative risk infused with the discourse of their masters. Many of these masters informed the student’s desire to enter the production classroom. So, when students expect their work to be met with delight but receive criticism instead, they may resist classroom critique. More often than not, their peers in the classroom share this resistance. Both maker and audience cling to the depiction of violence as a viable, and even pleasurable, source of narrative and visual content. Establishing a clear framework for critique at the outset of the course provides a necessary means for interrogating the production of meaning.

A clear format for critique provides a means for mediating between the intellectual and creative safety of the individual and the concern for perpetuating violence both inside and outside the classroom. Cultivating student engagement and ownership over the critique spreads the responsibility for the production of meaning among producer, audience and faculty member. To foster this responsibility, the production teacher must first model for the class how to provide a critique of stylistic approach, production values, and narrative construction within the context of the creation of meaning. Then, the instructor can allow for the initial responses to the student's work to be student-driven. Ask the maker to hear how the class interprets the work.

Placing ownership of the material upon the collective student body generates the risk that the first responses might not address the depictions of violence. If so, the articulated strengths of the student's first movie effort provides the maker a more solid foundation for absorbing future critiques. If students directly address the violent depictions, the instructor can generate a seamless entry into a conversation linking theory and practice. In our collective teaching experiences, we have seldom witnessed a student initiate a discussion about the violent assaults that permeate student films. As faculty, we most often serve as the guides into conversations over what is at stake in creating and perpetuating such depictions.

While we often discuss "faculty" as a single entity, the instructor's subject position impacts the shape of our interventions into this discourse. We do not enter the classroom as unmarked bodies. Our identities push students to consider discussions of violence against women as ideologically motivated when facilitated by female faculty. Subject positions suggest unique sets of strategies for addressing violent assaults on women—strategies bound by advantages and disadvantages.

“Teachers are not abstract; they are women or men of particular races, classes, ages, abilities, and so on. The teacher will be seen and heard by students not as an abstraction, but as a particular person with a defined history and relationship to the world” (Weiler, 454). Students often ascribe feedback on content from female and underrepresented faculty to personal sensitivities and concerns rather than to scholarly foundations. Male faculty, on the other hand, particularly in a male dominated field, are afforded legitimacy of voice when challenging depictions of violence. As Faculty Development and Diversity Specialist, Dr. JoAnn Moody notes, “majority males are granted not only more authority and acceptance, but also more leeway to make mistakes in the classroom” (Moody, 29).

When students extend trust to the authoritative (male) source of critique, the issue becomes clarity of communication, not a questioning of motives. Do I, the student, understand what my male faculty member is telling me? When students question the underlying premise of critique along with the authority of female and other underrepresented faculty, challenging cinematic works becomes far more fraught. Male faculty are “entitled to intellectual authority and deference inside and outside of the classroom” in a way that women are still struggling to achieve. (Moody, 29). This authority positions male faculty to more immediately and forcefully challenge depictions of violence. They must.

Students need to see and understand the implications of perpetuating cinematic violence against women as a *shared* concern among our faculty. When male faculty refuse to prioritize these interventions, they place the burden of responsibility upon female faculty, compounding the difficulty of the intervention for the female faculty member. The male faculty member reinforces, for students, the perception that depictions of violence against women are the sole concern of “overly sensitive” or ideologically driven women. They undermine the critical

conversations we profess to encourage. Without this shared articulation, faculty communicate to our students, male and female, that this conversation and concern are purely optional. As a faculty community, we all must address these depictions on a much wider scale, as part of a sustained conversation.

Reading our students and the waters of the classroom, we can determine when and how to best raise the concerns arising in student works. Among women, we must acknowledge that multiple subject positions contribute to one's chosen strategies. "What works for a white female teacher may not work for a black female teacher, regardless of a shared commitment to be critical" (Hoodfar, 304). Given subject position, the instructor must consider the most effective strategy for intervening in the production of violence against women.

While male faculty can and should address depictions as soon as they come up, female faculty members might consider one of three options. First, segue from the initial student critiques into a discussion that returns students to the site of violence within the work. Given the primary characteristics driving cinematic representations of violence against women in student films, begin by asking questions about the development of the female character or the narrative motivation behind the violence. These questions allow the instructor to transition into conversations directly linking film theory and practice.

Second, set aside 10-15 minutes at the end of class to return to themes not covered during the initial critique. This strategy provides an effective means for addressing content in an introductory course, as it creates a bit of distance between project and maker. The newly created space presents an opportunity to discuss depictions of violence against women as a larger concern—to situate it within a broader context—with the individual project as the catalyst, but not the end of the conversation. If depictions occur in more than one student film, the repeated

themes provide a site for questioning the causes of the repetition. Faculty are poised to ask students why they think these themes are present in more than one work? Is it simply coincidence? An act of production or, simultaneously, reproduction? What do students perpetuate when reproducing depictions of violence? As female faculty, we find that students respond to a regular discussion at the end of class as more reflective, removing the discussion from being read as reactive.

Third, at the outset of the semester, establish a rhythm for returning to themes generated in student works on the day following a rough cut or final cut critique. This not only provides distance between maker and work, but also provides the faculty member an opportunity to return with clips and readings for enhancing class discussion. Integrating the ritual of returning to themes further diminishes the perception of reaction by enforcing a link between form and content that can begin to permeate the student's creative process.

While many instructors adopt a practice of banning particular content from student films at the outset, we find that simply prohibiting storytelling elements, such as depictions of violence, shuts down a critique of both production and reception. Bans ensure that our future producers remain as uncritical in their production of such depictions as our current makers; we fail to intervene in the larger cycle of media productions.

For example, instructors who utilize a ban as a means of reducing violence in student films often have rape at the top of their lists of banned depictions. Two primary concerns compel us to restrain from the use of such a ban: 1. Sexual assault occurs in our society at an alarming rate. Many of our students have been or will be impacted by sexual assault. Severing the cinema as a site for negotiating and challenging these stories means that we remove the possibility of our students understanding the very elements contributing to sexual assault. While

a ban prevents our students from acts of hollow replication, it simultaneously excludes the rich and valuable personal stories they have to share. 2. Replicated stories provide an entry into conversations about the cinematic content students digest.

In a recent course, two students produced works that included a violent rape of a woman. In one, the mass produced and generic narrative plays out of a scorned male seeking revenge via the body of the female. In the other, the carefully constructed rape scene stands as a means to expose the vulnerability of lesbians in the U.S. military. The threat of exposure for the lesbian soldier, under the policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) provides the leverage for the male soldiers to “safely” perform the assault. While the violence remains exceedingly difficult to watch, the narrative and visual construction point back to the relationship between vulnerability and exploitation in the military.

Had a ban been in place, neither the conversation regarding gratuitous depictions in student films and mainstream cinema, nor the conversation about the negative implications for individuals living under DADT would have taken place in such an active connection to their own work and their own lives. Establishing a forum and format of discussion invites students to actively engage and challenge their own work as well as the work of others. They come to understand the issues they perpetuate when producing such imagery, and ways to break away from conventional representations.

The concern for the student who produced the work cannot override the concern for other members of the class. What message do we send when we deem the violent assault or murder of women not worth addressing? Additionally, how can we empower our “less privileged students if [we], in the position of teacher with all the right credentials, fail to face up to the challenges of classroom interactions, let alone society at large? How can [we] be expected to contribute to the

development of critical pedagogy if the price [we] pay is the denial of our own identities?”

(Hoodfar, 314). We must adopt practices that invite our students into these questions, practices that invite the critical and the creative potential of all of our students.

Enhancing Collaboration

Providing a conceptual framework for inspiring thoughtful, expressive student work sets the stage for students to fully engage with the myriad possibilities of cinematic production outside Hollywood hegemony. However, practical considerations for inviting students to work together and more deeply consider the processes involved in collaborative creative work feed into a dismantling of problematic content. And, significantly, they integrate women (and other marginalized groups) more equitably into production practice, which opens up the classroom to alternative visions.

One indispensable approach to creating a more inclusive classroom—that also carefully prepares students for production careers—involves demystifying the aura of the director as a solo creator while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of collaboration. Sabal provides an excellent set of best practices for student collaboration that we won’t duplicate here (see “The Individual in Collaborative Media Production”), but one of the ways to encourage students to think about directing in a practical and collaborative light is to spend a session brainstorming characteristics that exemplify a “good” director—and, once these qualities are established, to insist that students aspire to them. In our experience, students quickly realize that what they seek from a director doesn’t align with their mythology. They almost always end up describing a person who listens, inspires, communicates, guides, and manages, not someone who controls, sulks, preaches, blames, or criticizes.

From here, the production teacher can position the director as a leader for group collaboration, placing this role much closer to equal with that of her fellow crew members. Doing so mitigates the hierarchical assumptions about what it means to crew on a film, opening the possibility of leadership up to a wider swath of the class. A greater variety in the types of leaders on class projects also yields alternative creative interpretations and a wider range of characters and narrative content.

To expand on a crucial point made by Citron and Seiter, creating an inclusive classroom also means characterizing filmmaking as a process, not a product of a sole creator. For students, modeling this strategy often boils down to discussions about communication, and how to communicate effectively in groups, especially as students are embarking upon a collaborative project.

Even in classes where groups are organized into specific crew positions—director, producer, director of photography, editor, etc.— the key is to spend a significant amount of time defining the responsibilities of each position, and that position’s responsibility to the group as a whole. Each student then understands her commitment to the group, which reduces power struggles that often result when groups are thrown together ad hoc, and increases the accountability for each group member’s contribution.

In addition, throughout the course, no student should hold the same position twice, so that each student has an opportunity to perform multiple roles on crew, including those positions traditionally tied to specific gender roles. This model underscores the importance of the group as a whole in producing the final product, and how working together is essential to long-range success: process over product.

Confronted with a model of collaboration that challenges preconceived notions of the filmmaking process, students sometimes resist this strategy (as they do with other critical pedagogical strategies detailed here) —or at least default to their original behavioral patterns—once the stress of production has set in. One way to ensure buy-in to this process is to ask groups to create a set of guidelines for acceptable communication that their team will follow before they even begin pre-production. Will they tolerate yelling? What if the director disagrees with suggestions from the D.P.? What will they do if a group member is late or not fully participating? Establishing such expectations reminds students that each group member's contribution is critical to the success of the project, and asks students to reflect on their own communication and working styles.

Because the guidelines they establish are agreed upon as a kind of group contract, this portion of the project also ensures accountability for all group members, especially those who might typically be more reluctant to actively engage. For women, then, this process sets up an expectation that they will participate to the same degree as their peers, as required by their crew position and the group contract, and therefore helps to strip stereotypical gender associations from more neutrally defined work roles. Enabling women to move into traditionally masculine roles also helps to diminish gender biases among the rest of the class. Counteracting these “real-life” stereotypes further encourages students to think about the representations they shape in their film work, and where those representations originated.

A final way to upend conventional authoritative structures, and thereby call into question how authority is (often problematically) constructed, is to integrate students into the assignment creation process. Sharing this responsibility places students in an unfamiliar position of power and gives them a sense how assignments are designed to meet certain learning goals—and ways

that assignments sometimes fail. Julia Johnson provides an example:

...I interrupt traditional teacher authority by asking students to co-construct several major assignments in the course. I begin by providing students with a general set of guidelines for assignments... Based on the assignments students generate, I facilitate discussion and together we select the core projects for the term. During this conversation, I talk openly about my goals for the course and how I see the assignments they have generated addressing those goals. After assignments are selected, I then assume the responsibility of ensuring that multiple learning modalities are addressed within and across assignments (to ensure greater inclusion) and develop written guidelines for assignments so that performance expectations are clearly articulated. (Johnson 148)

While some amount of faculty policing is required to ensure that all students participate in the collective discussion, this method invites students to think about who holds power in the classroom setting and how authoritative structures can privilege some voices and diminish or even silence others. This type of reflection enables students to think about their own positions of power, how they treat those in “inferior” positions, and to effect a change in attitude and behavior in hierarchical situations.

Shared assignment creation also encourages more collaborative and active learning—if students are asked to come up with their own learning goals, they recognize their investment in their learning, but they also better understand how assignments are intentionally designed to meet specific educational outcomes. Fostering such a collaborative environment models power-

sharing and provides an alternative to the hierarchical approaches to collaboration that so often isolate marginalized students.

Integrating Cooperative Learning

In our experience as film faculty, a common and persistent observation is that women students often hang back during technical demonstrations. Men actively leap into the opportunity to experiment with equipment, while women remain observers on the sidelines. Again, a lack of prior contact with equipment, together with pressures like stereotype threat, feed into this reticence. To combat this imbalance and draw women into the fold, a cooperative learning technique known as “jigsaw” can be easily employed.

The jigsaw strategy uses cooperative learning as a pedagogical approach to emphasize interdependence of learning through group accountability. For the group to succeed, each individual must succeed. Each member is accountable for contributing his or her share to ensure group success, and the group as a whole is accountable for its final product. The jigsaw strategy works like a puzzle. Each student contributes a key element to the end goal, so that “each piece—each student’s part—is essential for the completion and full understanding of the final product. If each student’s part is essential, then each student is essential” (Aronson).

For example, a technical demonstration might include three different microphones: handheld, shotgun, and lavalier. After some initial instruction, the class is divided into three core groups that are ultimately responsible for learning all three mics. To achieve this, individual members of each core group are assigned to a specific microphone “learning station.” These new groups work together to master the microphone at their station and become “expert” teams. Once the allotted time is up, everyone returns to their core group, where each “expert” exchanges what they’ve learned with their other core group members. Each member, therefore, is accountable for

learning in order to share their expertise with their group. To further ensure accountability, the entire class takes a quiz over all the material at the end of class.

The jigsaw strategy calls for active participation of all members of class and prevents a small group of students from dominating the class as often occurs in less organized learning situations. In addition to removing hierarchical authority from the learning process, it ensures that women and other hesitant or cautious students play a full part of the educational process. Any conflicts or barriers that come up in group work are mitigated by making students accountable for not only their learning, but the learning of the group; if a student can't get past an interpersonal issue, they threaten the success of the group as a whole, so it's to their advantage to learn how to navigate personal disputes. Jigsaw, then, also challenges students to continue building collaborative communication skills, and models the teamwork needed on a production set in a challenging but more gender-neutral way.

Re-sounding the Call

Taken together, the strategies outlined here call for a reimagined production classroom. Both fundamental and seemingly simple interventions can powerfully transform the portrayals and participation of women in the field of cinematic production. These interventions must permeate all aspects of our classes and our course designs: the means for assigning roles and establishing a collaborative work environment, the format for critique, and the examples we bring to the floor.

Generations of students have been waiting for change. Production faculty can no longer ignore the disparity present in the numbers of women enrolled in and pursuing production, nor can we ignore the gendered breakdown in crew hierarchies. We can no longer justify a failure to

challenge the problematic and often violent representations of acts against women that occur in our classrooms, and by extension, on our multiplex, TV, and computer screens.

Silence is not an option. We fail our students when we fail to address their acts of replication; when we allow them to fall back upon claims of “it’s just entertainment.” If we do not challenge the perpetuation of misogyny, if we fail to recognize these depictions as such, we become complicit in the on-going violence against women—the violence of objectification, the violence of assault. And if we fail to address these depictions, we fail to make the classroom and this field a safe pursuit for our female students. On the most basic level, we fail to meet the short term goals of supporting and challenging our students in the creation of vibrant and meaningful work, and in the pursuit of knowledge and critical thought in higher education. We fail to meet the long-term goals of diversifying the field of makers and the field of representations. Too much is at stake to treat these concerns frivolously.

In academe, media production is sometimes viewed as a secondary discipline, undeserving of the same serious attention as other scholarly and theoretical pursuits. However, the impact on students outlined here, and the power of media to teach critical analysis, demonstrate that media pedagogy demands considered and careful examination. By working collectively with our faculty and our departments as a whole, we draw our students into a vital conversation. We launch a process by which students and faculty collectively shift the media landscape in and outside our institutions. We need to re-imagine and reinvent media production pedagogy with an eye to future possibilities and innovation, rather than rehashing and recycling past cinematic debris. After more than thirty years battling the same issues, it’s about time that we do.

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